

“AS MY ANCESTORS KNEW, THE MOUNTAINS ARE GENEROUS, BUT THEY NEED SOMETHING GIVEN BACK TO THEM.” — Antonio Trujillo, *Taos News*, July 31, 1988.

Last month the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry came to Questa to present their Public Health Assessment. The report is significant, and RCRC is devoting the entire newsletter to it.

ATSDR Public Health Assessment—Questions And Answers

WHO IS THE ATSDR AND WHAT ARE THEY DOING IN QUESTA?

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. When the Molycorp mine was listed as a Superfund site, the ATSDR was required by law to come to Questa to find out if people are exposed to toxic substances, whether those exposures are, were, or could be harmful, and to make recommendations on what to do.

WHAT WERE THE ATSDR CONCLUSIONS?

The ATSDR categorized the area in and around Questa as:

A Past Public Health Hazard: based on estimated past exposures to toxics in private well water (arsenic, cadmium, iron, magnesium, manganese, molybdenum, zinc, fluoride or sulfate), and to past exposures to dust blowing off the tailings piles.

A Future Public Health Hazard: based on the possibility that people may use contaminated wells, that tailings dust may not be controlled, or that waste rock stability may not be addressed.

No Apparent (present) Public Health Hazard: based on indications that currently no one is using contaminated wells, and that current dust levels are within air standards.

DOES THE RÍO COLORADO RECLAMATION COMMITTEE AGREE WITH ATSDR FINDINGS?

No, the RCRC disagrees with the ATSDR on several points.

First, RCRC asserts that unstable rock piles at the mine site create a **present public health hazard**. Mitigation work to hopefully arrest downward movement is underway, but not complete.

Second, the RCRC does not agree with the ATSDR's assessment of no adverse health impacts from tailings dust. Occasional high intensity winds and subsequent tailings exposures, are not reflected in the exposure rates used in the study, and may be a **present public hazard**.

Third, RCRC believes that contaminated wells and tailings embedded water lines are a **present public health hazard**.

Fourth, RCRC believes the agency has not completed an adequate study of Questa's health history. RCRC believes the agency should speak to more residents, and to area health care providers.

BASED ON ATSDR RECOMMENDATIONS, WHAT CAN A RESIDENT DO TO MINIMIZE EXPOSURE TO CONTAMINANTS IN WATER AND AIR?

- 1) If you drink water from a private well, have it tested at least one a year for metals and related contaminants.
- 2) If you find that your private well is contaminated, do not use this source of water for drinking and, if possible, de-commission the well.
- 3) If you have a respiratory related illness, are older, or a child, minimize your exposure to blowing dust from tailings. The ATSDR advises all citizens to stay indoors during episodes of high winds and high dust levels in the vicinity of the tailings facility.
- 4) Thoroughly wash all produce that may have been exposed to dust, irrigation water, or private well water.

IS THE QUESTA VILLAGE WATER SUPPLY SAFE?

RCRC has concerns about the safety of Questa's drinking water since the water lines are buried in tailings. A number of citizens have reported health problems that could be related to heavy metal contamination. RCRC supports the village of Questa's substantial efforts to replace the water lines.

The ATSDR agrees with the New Mexico Environment Department that the Questa Village's water supply is safe for drinking, as there has been no positive identification of tailings in the Questa water supply. However ATSDR supports replacing all municipal water lines bedded in tailings.

NEED FOR HEALTH STUDIES IN QUESTA

When the ATSDR presented their Public Health Assessment at the recent community meeting in Questa, Mayor Charlie Gonzales wondered why ATSDR hadn't visited medical clinics in Taos or Questa. It was a fair question; the Public Health Assessment states that the "... ATSDR actively gathers information and comments from people who live and work near a site, including ... health professionals." Getting a handle on the health situation of Questa residents should be the next step in completing the Assessment. There is much ATSDR can do—authorize disease registries and pilot studies of health effects, for instance.

RCRC URGES RESIDENTS TO COMMENT ON THE PUBLIC HEALTH ASSESSMENT

Mayor Gonzales also told ATSDR, "You people need to knock on some doors." Unfortunately ATSDR was unable to do this, citing limited resources; they said they depend on the community to bring information to them. It's not too late to do this since the report is a draft. Public comments will be accepted postmarked October 22nd.

Written comments go to:
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Questa Community Meeting – Thursday, November 4 at 6:30pm, La Cienega Community Center

A community based organization dedicated
to the reclamation of the Molycorp mine
and the restoration of the Red River in
Northern New Mexico.

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